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In Art Design & Cultural Heritage

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Empowering Local Mind  
In Art Design & Cultural Heritage

# 3rd ISME International Colloquium 2016

## **EDITORS AND COMPILERS:**

Dr. Azahar Harun  
Dr. Rosli Zakaria  
Dr. Abd Rasid  
Pn. Haslinda Abd Razak  
Pn. Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh  
En Nadzri Mohd Sharif  
En. Shaleh Mohd Mujir  
Pn Fatrisha Mohamed Yussof  
Pn Anith Liyana Amin Nudin  
Pn Ilinadia Jamil  
Cik Fazlina Mohd Radzi  
Cik Aidah Alias  
Cik Nurkhazilah Idris

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Norsharina Samsuri

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# Content

1	<b>Personification in Marketing Communication: Case Study of Malaysian Brands</b>	9
	<i>Azahar Harun, Mohamed Razeef Abd Razak, Russlan Abd Rahim, Lili Eliana Mohd Radzuan, Amina Syarfina Abu Bakar</i>	
2	<b>The Image of Man after September 11</b>	21
	<i>Mohd. Shaharudin Sabu, Mohd. Saharuddin Supar, Hisammudin Ahmad, Shaharin Sulaiman, Ahmad Zuraimi Abdul Rahim, Mohd. Ali Azraei Bebit, Shahrul Munir Mohd Kaulan</i>	
3	<b>The Image Construction of Loro Blonyo Craft in Global Market through Packaging Design that Reflect Local Image</b>	27
	<i>Nanang Yulianto, Edy Tri Sulistyoya, Slamet Subiyantoro, and Nadia Sigi Prameswaria</i>	
4	<b>Game-Based Learning using Visual Spatial Approach for Children with Autism to Improve Social Development: A Pilot Study</b>	32
	<i>Ilinadia Jamil, Fatrisha Mohamed Yussof, Nor Yus Shahirah Hassan, Azzureen Nor Ain Azizuddin and Zainal Kadir</i>	
5	<b>Visual Iklan Berunsurkan Seksual Di Media Internet: Persepsi Golongan Bawah Umur</b>	42
	<i>Fatrisha Mohamed Yussof, Ilinadia Jamil, Azahar Harun, Norsharina Samsuri, Nurkhazilah Idris, Nor Sabrena Norizan</i>	
6	<b>An Iconographical Interpretation Of Street Art In Malaysia</b>	51
	<i>Syafril Amir Muhammad, Nurul Huda Mohd Din, Profesor Dr. Muliyadi Mahamood, Dr. Mumtaz Mokhtar</i>	
7	<b>The Relationship between Place and Hallmark Event; Malaysian Cultural Context</b>	64
	<i>Musaddiq Khalil, Amer Shakir Zainol, Shaliza Dasuka, Liza Marziana, Khazilah Idris, and Fazlina Radzi</i>	
8	<b>Aplikasi Teknik Tempa dan Peleburan dalam Seni Arca Besi Raja Shahriman Raja Aziddin</b>	74
	<i>Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh, Shaliza Dasuki, Nurkhazilah Idris, Fazlina Mohd Radzi, Musaddiq Mohd Khalil Imran</i>	
9	<b>Sulaman Keringkam : Motif Kemasan Sisi Beridentiti Melayu Tempatan</b>	85
	<i>Norhasliyana Hazlin Zainal Amri, Hamdzun Haron, dan Abdul Latif Samian</i>	
10	<b>Malay Aesthetic Concept through Malay Woodcarving Motifs in Visual Artworks</b>	97
	<i>N. A. Hassan, P. Amin, and S. Tohid</i>	
11	<b>Ilustrasi Poster Kempen Alam Sekitar dalam Simbol Kebudayaan</b>	106
	<i>Muliyati Binti Mat Alim and Profesor Madya Dr. Abdul Halim bin Husain</i>	
12	<b>Penghayatan Nilai- Nilai Patriotisme Dalam Arca Awam Pelajar Uitm Melaka Sempena Pertandingan Hiasan Patriotisme Daerah Alor Gajah</b>	118
	<i>W. M. Z. Wan Yaacob, N.H. Abdulah, A. Osman, M. F. Samsudin, M. A. A. Bebit, S. M. Mohd Kaulan dan M. S. Sabu</i>	

13	<b>Keunikan Ukiran Patung Kayu dalam Kehidupan Kaum Jah Hut dalam Keperluan dan Kepercayaan</b>	124
	<i>Nor Edzrine Binti Abdullah Sani</i>	
14	<b>Properties of Mandi Bunga (flowering bath) as Malaysian tradition Practice</b>	135
	<i>S. Roslan, R. Legino</i>	
15	<b>Malaysian Batik Painting From 1950 to 2010: A Study on Style</b>	145
	<i>A.E. Mohd Fauzi, N. H. Ghazali and N. H. Ahmad</i>	
16	<b>Interpreting Motif and Pattern in Mohd Nor Mahmud Painting Batik: <i>Pakai Semutar Kain Lepas</i>.</b>	151
	<i>H. Abd Razak, R.Legino, B. Samuri</i>	
17	<b>The Aesthetic of Traditional Lurik in Socio-Cultural Context</b>	157
	<i>E. S.Handayani</i>	
18	<b>Brand Identity on Local Malay Herbal Toiletries Packaging Design as a Potential Tourism Product</b>	162
	<i>Siti Sarah Adam Wan, Noraziah Mohd Razali, Wan Nur Khalisah Shamsudin &amp; Ariff Ali</i>	
19	<b>Budaya Melayu Sebagai Simbol dan Makna Dalam Seni Catan Moden Malaysia</b>	172
	<i>Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh, Hamdzun Haron, Abdul Latif Samian &amp; Tengku Intan Suzila Tengku Sharif</i>	
20	<b>Budaya Visual ‘Seni Kolam’ Dalam Sistem Sosial Masyarakat India</b>	180
	<i>Santhi A/P Letchumanan, Lee Hoi Yeh, Prof. Madya Dr. Abdul Halim Hussain</i>	
21	<b>Cetusan Idea Seni Tekat Perak</b>	198
	<i>Azni Hanim Hamzah, Salina Abdul Manan, Noor Hafiza Ismail &amp; Nur Hikma Mat Yusuf</i>	
22	<b>Chlorophyll Print: An Alternative Approach to Describe Photographic Printing Process Using Nature Based For Photography Students</b>	207
	<i>Dona DLowii Madon, Aidah Alias, Raziq Abdul Samat, Farihan Zahari, Shafira Shaari &amp; Shaharin Sulaiman</i>	
23	<b>Designing Jawi Typeface to Enhance The Quality of Modern Design</b>	218
	<i>Mohamed Razeef Abdul Razak, Prof. Dr. D'zul Haimi Md. Zain, Dr. Azahar Harun, Dr. Saiful Akram Che Cob &amp; Lili Eliana Mohd. Radzuan</i>	
24	<b>Diversification of <i>Batik Jarum</i> Handicraft Art Product to Solidify Community Based Creative Economic Development in Klaten Regency</b>	225
	<i>Margana</i>	

25	<b>Empowering “Girli” Batik Craftswomen to Enhance Family Economy and Develop Tourism Village in Sragen District</b>	236
	<i>Dr. Slamet Supriyadi &amp; Prof. Dr. Sariatun</i>	
26	<b>Identiti Visual Seni Catan Moden Malaysia Melalui Media Campuran Dalam Konteks Kebudayaan</b>	244
	<i>Fairus Ahmad Yusof <sup>1</sup> Prof. Madya. Dr. Abdul Halim Husain</i>	
27	<b>Inovasi Media TMK Dalam Pendekatan Pembelajaran dan Pengajaran Pendidikan Seni Visual Berasaskan Gaya Belajar Visual</b>	274
	<i>Siti Hayati binti Haji Mohd Yusoff</i>	
28	<b>Interpretasi Kandungan Imej Fotografi Digital Sosio-Masyarakat Melayu Berdasarkan Konsep Literasi Visual</b>	291
	<i>Nadzri Mohd Sharif, Meor Hasmadi Meor Hamzah &amp; Nor Fariza Baharuddin</i>	
29	<b>Kartun Akhbar Sebagai Wadah Penyampaian Suara Masyarakat: Suatu Kritikan Terhadap Isu-Isu Semasa</b>	304
	<i>Shaliza Dasuki, Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh, Nurkhazilah Idris, Fazlina Mohd Radzi, Musaddiq Mohd Khalil &amp; Nur Hasliza Abdulah</i>	
30	<b>Kartun Bertemakan Keagamaan Atas Talian: Interpretasi Dakwah dan Sindiran</b>	317
	<i>Fazlina Mohd Radzi, Shaliza Dasuki, Nurkhazilah Idris, Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh &amp; Musaddiq Muhammad Khalil</i>	
31	<b>Keindahan Tengkolok Getam Pekasam Warisan Kesultanan Perak Darul Ridzuan</b>	326
	<i>Liza Marziana Mohamad Noh, Salina Abdul Manan, Azni Hanim Hamzah, Noor Hafiza Ismail &amp; Mohd Hafiz Sabran</i>	
32	<b>Menggembur ‘Memori Kolektif’: Potensi ‘Seni Partisipatori’ Sebagai Media Konservasi Budaya</b>	333
	<i>Diana Ibrahim, M. Hendra Himawan dan Mohd Saharuddin Supar</i>	
33	<b>Model Landskap Bandaraya Islam Di Kawasan Tropika Berdasarkan Empat Faktor Nilai Rekabentuk</b>	343
	<i>N. H Ramle &amp; R. Abdullah</i>	
34	<b>Pelaksanaan PBS Guru-Guru PSV Hilir Perak Dalam Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Berasaskan Estetik</b>	352
	<i>Lee Hoi Yeh, Dr. Mohd Zahuri Khairani</i>	
35	<b>Permata Yang Hilang: Pembelajaran Penulisan Seni Khat Dan Jawi</b>	367
	<i>Ainun Jariah Yaacob, Ahmad Rajaei Awang, Mohd Fadil Sulaiman, Mohd. Yazid Misdî</i>	

36	<b>Persona Komunikasi Tipografi di dalam Artifak Kartografi</b>	380
	<i>Wan Juria Emeih Wahed &amp; Ridzuan Hussin</i>	
37	<b>The ‘Me-Too’ Phenomenon in Packaging Design: A Case Study of Malaysian Retail Products</b>	392
	<i>Anith Liyana Amin Nudin, Mohd Amin Mohd Noh, Wan Nur Khalisah Shamsudin, Izwan Abdul Ghafar, Norsharina Samsuri, Nik Narimah Nik Abdullah and Fatrisha Mohamed Yussof</i>	
38	<b>Interaction Design in Collaborative Augmented Reality (AR) Story-book for Children</b>	403
	<i>Lili Eliana Mohd Radzuan, Wan Nur Khalisah Shamsudin, Siti Nurlzaura Razis, Azahar Harun and Mohamed Razeef Abd Razak</i>	
39	<b>Analisis Proses Penghasilan Lakaran Awal Dari Segi Penggunaan Material, Idea dan Pengisian (Contents) Mengikut Bidang-Bidang yang Terdapat di Fakulti Seni Lukis &amp; Seni Reka, UiTM Melaka: Kajian Kes Pameran Think Things Pada Tahun 2016</b>	410
	<i>Salmah Ali, Hisammudin Ahmad, Haslinda Razak, Wan Nor Ayuni Wan Mohd Zain, Norsharina Samsuri, Nurkhalilah Idris dan Muhammad Fitri Samsuddin</i>	
40	<b>Corporate Rebranding Design of Oil and Gas Company in Malaysia: Case Study of SMART Petrol</b>	423
	<i>Amina Syarfina Abu Bakar, Azahar Harun, Mohamed Razeef Abd Razak</i>	
41	<b>Apresiasi Karya Seni Catan ‘Siri Dungun’ Dalam Pendekatan Etnomatematik</b>	434
	<i>Rushana Bte Sulaiman @ Abd Rahim, Rushana Bte Sulaiman @ Abd Rahim</i>	
42	<b>Aturan Pertiga (Rule Of Thirds) Sebagai Elemen Baru Dalam Pembelajaran Komposisi Bagi Menghasilkan Karya Seni Catan</b>	449
	<i>Shahariah Mohamed Roshdi, Hisammudin Ahmad, Mohd Haniff b. Mohd Khalid, Dr. Abd. Rasid Ismail, Fazlina Mohd Radzi, Nur Hasliza Abdulah, Nurul Izza Ab. Aziz</i>	
43	<b>Kempen Budi Bahasa Melalui Senireka Bentuk Pembungkusan Produk SME</b>	461
	<i>Farhanah Abu Sujak, Siti Raba’ah Abdul Razak, Nurul Akma Abdul Wahab, Nurin Elani Makrai</i>	
44	<b>Participatory Art Project To Develop The Creative Potential Of Students Of Senior High School In Surakarta</b>	470
	<i>Adam Wahida</i>	
45	<b>Pemikiran Visual Terhadap Permainan Ceper Berasaskan Sistem Sosial Budaya</b>	479
	<i>Zulpaimin bin Hamid, Prof. Madya Dr. Abdul Halim bin Hussain</i>	

46	<b>Pengaruh Elemen Vegetal Dalam Seni Mushaf Nusantara</b>	493
	<i>Nurul Huda Mohd Din, Syafril Amir Muhammad, Prof. Dr. D'zul Haimi Md Zain, Dr. Mumtaz Mokhtar</i>	
47	<b>Puppet Staging through Media Creation Workshop as the Development of Character Building Model for the Marginal in Bengawan Solo Riverbanks</b>	509
	<i>Endang Widiyastuti</i>	
48	<b>Rattan Furniture Design: A Comparison Study between Malaysia and Indonesia Design Trend</b>	520
	<i>Muhammad Muizzuddin Bin Darus, Dr. Ruwaidy Bin Mat Rasul, Abu Bakar Bin Abdul Aziz, Nurhikma Binti Mat Yusof, Dr Deny Willy Junaidi</i>	
49	<b>Seni sebagai Praktis Sosial: Garis Teori dan Amalan Dalam Seni Rupa Kontemporari Malaysia</b>	529
	<i>Diana Ibrahim, Mohd Yuszaidy Mohd Yusoff, and Yusmilayati Yunus</i>	
50	<b>Struktur Reka Bentuk Mimbar Masjid Baru Terengganu</b>	541
	<i>Noor Hafiza Ismail, Hamdzun Haron, Zuliskandar Ramli, Salina Abdul Manan &amp; Azni Hanim Hamzah</i>	
51	<b>Tapak Warisan Arkeologi Lembah Bujang: Keunikan Arkeopelancongan Di Negeri Kedah</b>	549
	<i>Farhana Abdullah, Adnan Jusoh, Nasir Nayan &amp; Zuliskandar Ramli</i>	
52	<b>Study On Symbolism Of Malay Islamic Cultural Heritage In Malaysian Visual Arts : Found In Syed Ahmad Jamal Artworks</b>	558
	<i>Nurkhazilah Idris, Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh, Shaliza Dasuki, Fatrisha Mohd Yussof, Fazlina Mohd Radzi, Musaddiq Muhamad Khalil</i>	
53	<b>Temporary Evacuation and Relief Centre Design Management in Malaysia: an Overview</b>	569
	<i>Dr Ruwaidy Bin Mat Rasul, Muhammad Muizzuddin Bin Darus, Abu Bakar Bin Abdul Aziz</i>	
54	<b>The Cotton Cloth Qur'an binding of the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula</b>	577
	<i>Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria</i>	
55	<b>The Roles of Interactive Multimedia Learning Android-based Application for Primary Schools Teachers</b>	585
	<i>Tjahjo Prabowo, Mohamad Suhartob, Mulyanto, Nadia Sigi Prameswari</i>	
56	<b>The Status Quo of Malaysian Printmaking</b>	592
	<i>Siti Safura Zahari, Nur Fatiyah Roslan, Nurin Elani Makrai, Nor Arseha Karimon, Mohd Fawazie Arshad and Romli Mahmud</i>	



# Malay Aesthetic Concept through Malay Woodcarving Motifs in Visual Artworks

N. A. Hassan<sup>1</sup>, P. Amin<sup>2</sup>, and S. Tohid<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Fine Art, Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

\*corresponding author: iekahssan@gmail.com

**Abstract—** Woodcarving is a cottage industry for the Malays in ancient times and it is one of the tangible heritages that should be preserving and sustained. Unfortunately, it is not widespread and only covers the states on the East Coast as Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang. Traditional Malay woodcarving depicts the Malay concept of beauty, which governs seven basic principles, like spiritualism or mysticism, unity, symbolism, refinement, and flexibility. Furthermore, this study is to identify the Malay traditional woodcarving motifs in visual artworks based on interpretations of Malay aesthetic principles and elements in order to proven that the motifs is represent the Malay aesthetic concept. The various selected samples of artworks has been identify and analysed used a theory of Malay beauty concept by Zakaria Ali (1989). Qualitative methods are applied in this study and it based on the process of gather the data analysis form the literature within Malay aesthetic context and interlinking it to the visual analysis artwork. Indeed, the outcome of this study the motifs in the visual artworks which have represent a Malay aesthetic and it will sustain the uniqueness of Malay art in Malaysia for the next generations to appreciate it.

**Author Keywords:** *Malay Aesthetic; Concept; Malay Woodcarving; Motifs; Visual Artworks*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Wood carving is the one of Malay tangible heritages that should be preserving and sustained because it is a part of Malaysian cultural identity. Malay wood carving art is one of the handicrafts that have high aesthetic values which are rich in its diversity of its own and it includes diversity in terms of functionality. The motif is representing the uniqueness of design and high value and meaning implicit in every type of engraving. Malay wood carving also generally derived from the natural sources of flora and fauna. From these sources, woodcarvers will design, modify, and transform into abstract beautiful design. As God who loves the beauty and so are we as human being loves the beauty also because we

would get some peace and satisfactions by producing the wood carvings. Thus, this study is to identify the Malay traditional woodcarving motifs in visual artworks based on interpretations of Malay aesthetic principles and elements in order to proven that the motifs is represent the Malay aesthetic concept. The various selected samples of artworks has been identify and analysed used a theory of Malay beauty concept by Zakaria Ali (1989). It is also indirect to preserve and sustained this traditional Malay wood carving in Malaysia. According to Wan Mustapha (2009) aesthetic elements, motif and philosophy are key elements that distinguish a carved artsy or not. Philosophy woodcarvings in Malay Peninsular were influenced by the teachings of Islam. Islam as a philosophy of life of the community who believe in only one God, the God who is worthy to be the starting point of the first woodcut made in accordance with the teachings of Islam.

However, before the coming of Islam, traditional woodcarving has been influenced by Hinduism through their motifs and designs. Similarly, with the study by Hussin et., al (2012) which explains that the related philosophy is used in selecting traditional Malay woodcarving motifs. On the other hand, literature shows that comparatively fewer studies have been conducted on professional genres. The previous study by Tohid (2006) has discovered the creative and aesthetic aspirations a Malay woodcarver, Wan Mustaffa Wan Su"s of formerly known as Wan Po towards his philosophy in executing his work. Woodcarving, however, do not form as a decorative art in palaces and houses only they are also found in the mosque, prayer houses (surau). The parallel study by Yusof et., al (2014) stated that the application of woodcarving design on three eldest mosque in Malacca which is Tengkeri Mosque, Kampung Hulu Mosque and Kampung Keling Mosque has exposed the aesthetic appreciation based on their motifs and designs. The lack of understanding in the art of wood carving in Malaysia is also one of the causes of the deterioration in the application of the art of wood carving in the architecture of Malaysia. This condition was being supported by Kamarul Afizi Kosman (2009), stated that this condition is because of weakness of the process of dissemination in society. At the same time, this statement was being supported by Othman Yatim, (2009), shows the documentation of Malay wood carving that existed nowadays seen not systematic and has no coordination between institutions and make this condition more confusing. Over the past decades the study by Zaini, (1992), stated that the using of wood carving in socio-culture did not emphasize by other authorities while we know that Malay wood carving is one of our heritages that should be emphasized and exposed to other people, because wood carving is one of our cultural identity. Current study by Legino (2016) has stated the implementation of National Cultural Congress in 1971 were changed the Malaysian art scene and it has showed the evolution of Malay aesthetic in the visual arts and crafts in represented the Malaysian cultural identity. The visual artworks after the implementation of the National Cultural Congress has been changed totally rooted to the Malay/ Islamic centered art. This can be proven through the several artists that tend their artworks to the

Malay/Islamic art such as Ruzaika Omar Basaree in her artworks *Siri Dungun-Jendela Terbuka*, 1978 that represent the Malay aesthetic motif of woodcarving. Fewer artists also represented the same genres of artworks that influenced to the National Cultural Congress.

## **2. APPROPRIATE METHODS**

The scope of this research is restricted to the Malaysian artist artworks that applied the woodcarving as their subject in the artworks. Therefore, this study begins with reviewing the related data that comprised with the concept of Malay aesthetic and visual artwork from the previous and current studies was gathered and categorized. All selected documents were includes a wide range of literature on the definition of Malay aesthetic in the context of visual artwork. Then, the text and visual artwork analysis was conducted as to define the interrelation of Malay aesthetic. Finally, the analysis of samples artworks is used by a theory of Malay beauty concept by Zakaria Ali (1989) which is the theory is consists five main principles of beauty concept such as finesse, usefulness, unity, contrast and symbolism.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 *Traditional Malay Wood Carving in Malaysia***

Malay aesthetic is embodied in this Malay handicrafts started from a past decades, the decorative patterns that present in the Malay handicraft were having a form and meaning. Art in Malay culture traditionally existed alongside with the invention of utility items. Traditional Malay decorative element such as the curvilinear fretwork symbolize artistic beauty, and quality of design which stem from the society"s indigenous worldviews, cultural knowledge and appreciation of nature and natural creations that have been transformed into the physical world in the form of art. In other words, aesthetic is the appreciation of the quality art and its beauty.

Wan Hashim Wan Teh has wrote in his books *a Malay Handicraft Industries and Development* (1996), carving on wood and stone in Malaysian and other southeast Asian countries may have begun since time immemorial. As the life span of wood and timber is relatively short and rarely exceeds 200 years, evidence on the development of woodcarving in the past, beyond 200 years is almost unobtainable, (page 78). Design and motif of wood carving also have been discussed in this book define aesthetics as a "theory of beauty". The earliest evidence we could find on wood carving is from the Malay annals (*sejarah Melayu*) which describes some features of the palace of Sultan Mansur Shah of Melaka (1459-1477). In Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang are the countries that have

engraver hereditary. Mostly Malay wood carving is influenced by Siam because in the past all of these countries were under the influence of Siam. It can be defined in decoration that have in mosque, endowments, palaces and old houses have many similarities with wood carving in Siam.

### 3.2 *Aesthetic in Woodcarving Motif via Visual Artworks*

The aesthetic values actually can be seen in Malay art which is represent the beauty of Malay characteristic accordance to Zakaria Ali theory is through a woodcarving, batik, songket, kris, ceramic pottery, coconut grater (kukur kelapa) and others Malay traditional arts that identified as a richness of beauty in Malay aesthetic concept. The Malay traditional wood carving can be recognized by and based on the pattern, shape and purity. And it shows the Aesthetic values. Designs which are popular among the Malay carvers are of two basic types, namely „cut-out“ design (ukiran tebuk) and „carved in low relief“ design (ukiran timbul). A cut out design on a panel, which serves as a ventilation panel, would admit air and light. The common design of this category is the *awan larat* which is normally represented in the form of „coiling leaves and branches“. It is a repetition of almost a similar design beginning from one end and ending to other.

As for motif, it can generally classify it into five different types namely cosmic motif, flora motif, fauna motif, geometric motif and calligraphy. Both cosmic and fauna motifs are remnants of the pre-Islamic cultural tradition. Fauna motifs is rarely used in the Malay woodcarving as carving of living creatures is said to be forbidden by Islam.. In Malay wood carving, it has its own type-species, particularly in terms of pattern rules used in the production of wood carving. It is including *pola tumpal*, *pola pemedang*, *pola bujang*. The nature of these patterns is different and can vary according to the composition used by craftsmen in producing a woodcarving. The pemedang design pattern is commonly used with the purposes for which it also implicitly has aesthetic value, such as using motif *itik pulang petang* means that when afternoon, duck will return to the cage and behavior walk together to show the compatibility of friends, along with a model for human life. In addition, bamboo shoots motifs also gave good hopes for the purpose of bamboo or bamboo shoot is a tree that does not easily fall by strong winds. Usually bamboo shoots motifs are employed in the production of Songket cloth that has a signification that the wearer will always receive good luck and promise in every measure of his liveliness. Below are the several selected samples of artworks that have been identify and analysis to trace the Malay aesthetic concept that found in woodcarving motifs in visual artworks.

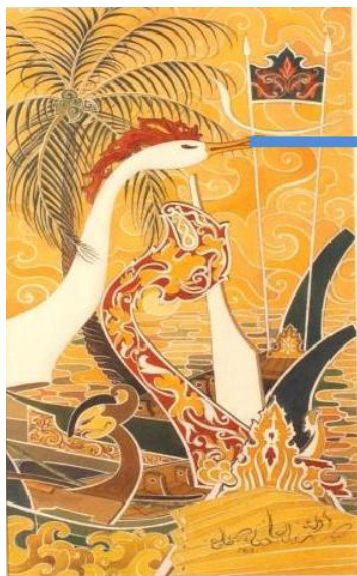


Fig. 1: Nik Zainal Abidin Nik Salleh,  
Bangau- Egret, 1962



Fig. 1.1: The image of Egret motif on the Head of  
Boat fishing display at National Museum. Photo  
by Nuratikah Abu Hassan, 2014.

Figure 1 show the artwork Egret (bangau) by Nik Zainal Abidin Nik Salleh in 1962. This artwork shows the image of egret in a white colour. This work tells about the social life of the community in the east coast of Kelantan who mostly work as fishermen. This work also shows that the painter is so sensitive and close to his birthplace. If you can see the image of a stork is the main subject which shows that most vessels fishing boat crane carved motifs because they believe that the stork is an animal that is efficient fishing and can bring benefits and safety of fishermen at sea. After the invasion of Islam in the region, all Hindu- Buddhist animals motif were eliminated. The fauna motifs which are the Egret bird that have been selected were modified wisely and has been produce in abstract way. This artworks used a monochrome colour in bringing an approach that brings the artist evoked memories of his birthplace. Arabesque motifs can be seen in formation in the sky that is so bumpy in the tender. However, the motif and image of puppetry has never been forgotten by the artist in his artworks.



Fig. 2: Ruzaika Omar Basaree, Siri Dungun- Jendela Terbuka, 1978

The related artwork in Figure 2 above show the transformation of artworks of Ruzaika Omar Basaree: Siri Dungun. The aesthetic of the artworks through their characteristic and the medium that she used in produce the artworks which is the architecture of woodcarving with the design of motif pucuk rebung and awan larat. The artworks show the beauty concept that stresses accordancing to Malay philosophical of awan larat in woodcarving. With the Malay traditional motifs: Pucuk Rebung. These motifs always used in the Malay arts such as the design of ornament in wood carving, batik and songket. From philosophical perspective, pucuk rebung is literally associated with a Malay proverb:

“if you want to bend a bamboo do it when it’s still a young shoot. “This saying informs us if we want to nurture our children we must do it when they are still small. Because it is rather late once they are young. According to Abdullah Mohamed (1993), Malay traditional crafts have their distinctive values either in their designs or philosophy. Pertaining to their designs, they are the outcome of stylization of objects around them. For instance the plant named pucuk rebung (bamboo shoots) is modified into two- and three-dimensional forms. Its two-dimensional forms appear on the ‘head’ panel (kepala kain) of sarong, especially on batik and songket. On the other hand its three-dimensional form is embodied in the shape of stupa (such as in shrines [candi] and also Malay houses). Therefore if we analyze traditional art of carving, we will find several basic forms in its design scheme like circle, triangle and square as related by Nakula.





Fig. 3: Mohamed Hj Abdullah (Nakula), Keping Kayu Ukir Kecil (2), 1981

The Figure 3 show the woodcarving, Keping Kayu Ukir Kecil by Mohamed Hj Abdullah or formerly known as Nakula produced in a year 1981. This woodcarving in a rectangle shape shows the combination with two designs, the design from flora and also the design of calligraphy. The pemedang design pattern in this woodcarving is commonly used with the purposes for which it also implicitly has aesthetic value. The motif of awan larat (stresses cloud) is shown in these artworks as to relate it with the beauty of nature that created by the creator (God). The Malay aesthetic concept is represented through the finesse of the woodcarving that produced by Nakula. The symmetrical balance of the motif is related with our life which means that as a human we need to balance our Dunya and akhirah life so that we cannot simply forget our purpose of life to serve to the only one God (Allah s.w.t). The beauty of the art carving could be referred back to what has been expressed by Wan Musa bin Wan Yusuf to Abdullah Mohamed (Nakula):

“It should sprout from an origin (seed) the origin is secret, sharp but not piercing neighbors, twisting but not enfolding them, yet revolving intimately. Motif of sulur (sprout) or cloud is symbolizing prosperous life motifs.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Wood carving is a high potential for subtlety and aesthetic owned. What should be taken care of is the quality and production. To sum up, this study is established in how the Malay aesthetic concept has been applied as a subject of study through visual artwork. Through this approach as to apply the woodcarving motif as a subject in the visual artworks will indicate in preserving and sustained the uniqueness and aesthetic values of Malay traditional carving that represented the Malaysian cultural identity. The suitable methods that used in this study provided sufficient data analysis from the previous and current studies and interlinked with the visual analysis for each artwork. Wood carving is more likely when various measures and efforts to avoid though, does it become extinct and the passage of time. Our heritage should be safeguarded and stored in the best possible order potential not die.

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